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ABSTRACT

It is apparent that the family, and the parents in particular, are powerful influences on the child's learning, even before the child reaches school. The home is the place where children learn first, and the extent to which they learn later in life is determined greatly by what goes on at home. The Affective Education Program, a Title I funded program, developed the parenting aspect of the program with the black parent and child in mind. Some of the special concerns one should be attentive to when working with the black community include: (1) priorities are different--maintenance and survival are primary concerns: (2) there is a general distrust and suspicion of institutions and the people who run them: (3) there is a need for parents to share valuable insights learned through generations of living in oppression, but there also is a need to be open and flexible to new ideas in order to help the child adjust to present realities: (4) the constant bombardment of negative stimuli from a hostile society produces low expectations at school and home: (5) there is an ambiance of physical danger in the black community and educators should be aware of its effects on the parent-child relationship: (6) the incidence of teenage pregnancy is high and there should be some preparation for, and some awareness raised about, the role of parents. (Author/RLV)

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AFFECTIVE PARENT EDUCATION IN PHILADELPHIA

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Affective Education Program
School District of Philadelphia
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This paper is written to give an overview of the work done by the Affective Education Program, a Title I funded program of the Philadelphia Public School System, in the area of parent education. Included is a rationale for the program's interest in working with parents, the factors that influence the content and implementation of our involvement and a brief description of the work we do.

Why should a Title I program such as Affective Education devote time, resources and energy to parenting? Of what value is it to form groups of parents to explore affective techniques and share their parenting experiences? What is the purpose? What is the rationale behind such a venture, when reading, writing and math are the avowed priorities of the Title I program?

In a paper delivered at the American Orthopsychiatric Convention in 1975, Dr. Ira Gordon stated that good parenting skills in the mother are directly correlated to I.Q. scores and socialization skills of the child. The Coleman report further substantiated this with data showing that the single biggest factor in a child's success with reading was the home environment. The noted psychologist, Israel Charney, describes families as places where children are vaccinated against the pain of life. He states that fear of loss and hurt underlie much underachievement.[1] In his book Let My Children Work!, John Blessington chides parents--"for better or worse, your children walk, talk and complain the way you do. If you read, they'll read with a little help. "The average parent is able to sense the particular sensitivities of his own children and respond to them. If our generation had been better educated in our schools we would know how to respond more effectively, more often."[2]

In short, it is very apparent that the family, and the parents in particular, are powerful influences on the child's learning even before the child reaches school. The family is a place where children learn first, and the extent to

which they learn later in life is determined greatly by what goes on at home. Most of what they learn is not only modeled in the home but also passed down through the generations and includes survival skills for coping with life as the family perceives and experiences it.

Ruth McKay, a research anthropologist noted at a recent conference[3] that minority groups raise their children in a society that views cultural difference as pathological and that they (minority groups) have great skill in helping their children cope in a hostile society.

According to the United States Office of Education, the incidence of teenage parenthood is soaring. Approximately 210,000 girls aged 17 or under gave birth in the U.S. in 1971. One out of every 10 school age girls is a mother, and 10% of these mothers have two children.

Let us take a look at the implications of these findings. First, the home is the most influential learning place for the child. Secondly, most of what is learned is done through modeling by the parents, and that parents have many skills which help the child function in society. It is also quite obvious that the effectivenss of the parent is directly related to the degree with which (a) the parent functions in the total society, (b) the ability of the parent to respond to the needs of the child (physical, intellectual, emotional), (c) the ability of the parent to articulate his/her own life experiences into positive nurturing legacies for the child.

Finally, there are many students who are parents, and even those who are not should have some preparation for their future role of parent.

Since the Affective Education Program services primarily Title I schools, the parenting aspect of the program was developed with the black or minority child and parent in mind. Granted that there is a basic underlying goal to parenting (decent, caring, responsible, successful children) there are special considerations that must be TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT when one conducts such a program

for parenting that is done OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM OF SOCIETY. First of all, the life concerns are prioritized differently. If we use Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a reference,[4] many minority parents are still wrestling with society to get basic physical and safety needs met. So they come to parenting sessions with different concerns or more likely, they do not come at all because they have more pressing life concerns that sap their energy and emotions. Maintenance and survival are primary concerns.

The attitudes of the minority parents about the society and its institutions are colored by life experiences that are many times at varience with or totally opposite from those experienced by the majority group. For example, the parent's attitude about school has serious implications for the child's success in school. If school is seen as a punitive fearful place, it is going to be very difficult for the child having such thoughts to achieve. Many times there are strong forces in the environment that create a distrust of what is being taught, the people who teach it and the benefits to be derived from the teaching. If there are no jobs, no bettering of one's condition as a result of the whole painful proces-why would one pass on education as something of value to one's child?

The parent must be able to give meaning and justification for the education process. This is a difficult thing to do for the parent who has trouble making sense out of the symbols and configurations of reading, who was treated in a demeaning manner in school and whose memory of school was a dismal one. So, there is then a credibility and trust issue to be dealt with when working with the minority parent.

Because this program is for low achievers, (most of whom are Black minorities), and those responsible for their education, we must also take into account that this fact colors the work we do with parents. Research[5] has shown that parents of low achievers tend to hold the teachers more responsible than the parents of high

achievers. On the other hand the teachers of low achievers feel its the child's innate ability (or lack of it) and the home influence that have greater importance in influencing a child's performance. Needless to say this is a cause of tension and conflict between parent and teacher that one must keep in mind when working with these parents.

The minority parent has many skills that have helped the family survive generations of living outside the larger society as an oppressed minority. Some are valuable, necessary legacies which have to be recognized as assets by the parent educator and shared with other parents. Some must be changed or updated to meet the realities of today. For example, one common practice in the black family was for children to be fed first, away from the adults. This is a throwback to the days when food was scarce and the children were fed first so that the adults would eat less. Also, mealtime was the place where the adults met to share their experiences of the day. As the extended family began to disappear from black homes, the working parents still used mealtime as the place to talk without intervention from the children. It is also one of the mores of black culture not to "talk with your mouth full." It is considered bad manners and unhealthy. The way to discourage it is to keep children quiet at meals. Mealtime for the child was a time to eat, and when you finished you left the table. This is still a common practice in many black homes. There is limited verbal interaction between the parent and child at mealtime. Studies have been made which show that there is a direct correlation between the mealtime verbal exchange of parent and child and the ability of the child to read. When this was pointed out at a recent parenting session, one parent remarked "I never realized this! I always make my kids shut up at dinner time and no fooling around." It was indeed a learning for her.

Vontress in his book Counseling Negroes[6] writes of the cultural islands

formed by the major minorities who are excluded from full participation in the larger society. He includes in this group the American Indian, the Spanish speaking, Appalachian whites and blacks. Of this group, blacks are the most "phobogenic" objects; feared, hated and dreaded by the larger society. This is reflected in our society's handling of its institutions, the media, in every aspect of life in the United States. Its major overall psychological effect on black people is negative feelings about self. A direct result of this constant bombardment on the educational process for minorities is low aspirations on the part of students and parents about the ability to succeed in school.[7] There is an acceptance of low black student achievement by educators and parents which begins at the primary grades and cuts across every socio-economic level.

The student's inability to relate to their teachers is also described as a cause of low achievement in black students. A study in Washington D.C. reported major criticisms of teacher-student relations. "The most frequently uttered sentences were that the teacher makes the student feel small, childish, unimportant and less than human.....A companion idea is that the teacher is really uninterested in the student's development."[8] Low expectations of students are frequently coupled with unrealistic praise on the part of the teacher in order to maintain order. Discipline in the classroom is administered differently to the minority child. Black students caught fighting in school are disciplined disproportionately - black students suspended while other students are lectured.

Another factor one must consider when dealing with the concerns of black parents is the incidence of violence in the black community. Drop out and rebellion of youth against school is rampant. In 1973, there were 70,000 serious physical assaults on teachers, hundreds of thousands of assaults on students including more than 100 student homicides in 1973.[9]

A recent study of gang youths in New York revealed that the major cause for their drop out was the feeling that schools were pointless. This commonly

identified cause for school drop out and gang membership has been the lack of a father figure. This study found that this was not an important factor, but the student's perceptions of school as irrelevant were.[10]

The black parents have inordinate, but justified fears for the safety of their children, especially the male youth. This is with good reason and is an important factor to consider when planning a parent education program. "The majority of all homicide victims in the U.S. last year were black and the perpetuator of the crime was a young black male between the ages of 20 and 24."[11] The number 1 cause of death among black males aged 15 - 30 is homicide. The unequal life chances of black youth is reflected in their cause of death: homicide, suicide, drug abuse and accidents as against accidents and cardiovascular diseases in white youth. The incidence of crime of violence in black neighborhoods is much higher than other neighborhoods. The chief victims of those crimes are blacks.[12] So fear for the physical survival of one's child in school and at home is a reality which has a direct bearing on one's style of parenting.

The incidence of parenthood in teenagers is high in the black community and in some cities, accounts for more than one-half of black births. So that the education of black youth about the role of the parent should be an integral part of a parenting program.

All students should have some preparation for or understanding of the responsibilities of being a parent. It would seem that for the black child this should be a major concern of educators and parents.

To summarize some of the special concerns one should keep in mind when approaching the subject of parent education for the black or minority parent are as follows. 1. The priorities are different - maintenance and survival are uppermost in the family. 2. There is a general distrust and suspicion of

institutions and the people who run them. 3. There is a need for parents to share valuable insights learned through generations of living in oppression, but there is also a need to be open and flexible to new ideas to help the child "make it" in the outside world. 4. The constant bombardment of negative stimuli from a hostile society produces low expectations at school and home, inability for the child to relate to teachers, harsher discipline in school, resulting in violence and drop out - all of which add to the burden of the black parent. 5. There is an ambience of physcial danger in the black community and there must be an awareness on the part of educators and parents of the effects on the parent-child relationship. 6. The incidence of teenage parenthood is high and there should be some preparation of and some awareness raised about the role of parents.

Much of what we teach parents is an adaptation of the ideas and techniques that the Affective Education Program uses with teachers who wish to have an "affective" classroom. We use role play, circle discussions, responding and listening skills: some of these techniques are used to get full and rich participation in the group and some are actual skills that the parent can use to relate and communicate with the child in a deeper manner. Our basic approach in parenting is that we do not have all the answers. In fact, we feel as though we are learners too. We see each parent group as a pool of resources from which individuals in the group can find information and nurturance. This is particularly true for the black parent, as so much of what is written and talked about concerning raising children, does not take into account the markedly different experiences of minorities in a hostile society. So the group constantly struggles with what is appropriate or not in the reality of their own situation.

Whatever we do with parents, whether it is working on parent/child communications, or enriching the parent's role as teacher, we always endeavor to:

1. share our own personal experiences.
2. use language that is clear and non-jargony.
3. assume that the parent has skills that work for him/her.
4. use the group as the gauge for what is "workable" or not "workable."
5. push them to try alternative ways to relate to their children.
6. take in account that the total society has inputs that make for many subtle differences between parenting and "black parenting."
7. provide many opportunities for parents to share their own experiences.
8. consider enhancing self-esteem as an ongoing concern.

Most of the program's involvement with parents has begun as a short series of sessions which teach the parent some basic communications skills or one session to raise awareness around the whole area of child rearing. For instance we might do a series of workshops using "active listening" or "I messages" both techniques outlined by Dr. Thomas Gordan in his book Parent Effectiveness Training, or we might do a one session workshop using posters to demonstrate some of the findings of educators and psychologist such as Sara Smilanski, Ira Gordon, and Milner aquaint parents with some important contributions they can make in their children's lives that help them learn. Many times we are invited back again and again to do other sessions. One of the workshops that have been very enjoyable for parents and children alike is a joint session where both parties participate. However we would rather hold sessions with a group of parents over a longer period of time, as it affords us a chance to work in depth and structure the sessions for maximum effect. We usually begin with a variety of relaxing discussions or games in order to get the parents talking to one another. The idea is to learn about each other in a very relaxed, non threatening atmsophere. We then have them look at their own parents and their memory of childhood. We examine "scripting" a concept out of Claude Steiner [13] which hypothesizes that different families have different notions about what life should be about and

how it should be lived. We believe these "family scripts" have a lot of bearing on child rearing practices and use them in a variety of ways. First, to give the parent an awareness about how priorities differ in families and why, and secondly, to help the parent prepare the child to cope with people outside the family. We think that this is crucial for the minority parent who must try to minimize the alienation of his/her child from the larger society yet have an appreciation of his own roots. We think that this has particular implications for helping to reduce the hostility many students and parents feel towards teachers and principals. We move on to examining some communicating techniques which can be used to increase the quantity and quality of parent/child interactions. The parents are introduced to a variety of problem solving and conflict resolution approaches that can be used with their children and others. Finally the parents begin to help each other solve problems. This sequencing can take from 6 to 10 weeks.

In outline form the sequencing would look like this:

I. Beginning Sessions

- a. getting to know one another.
- b. looking at ones own parents and ones own childhood.
  1. things that were liked
  2. things not liked
  3. things they do with their own children

II. Middle Sessions

- a. some communication skills.
- b. how to enrich the home environment to stimulate learning.
- c. some problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

III. Ending

- a. Parents use each other to solve problems.

When we began our work in Parent Education we identified three areas upon which to concentrate our efforts. They were:

1. to reach a larger number of low income minority parents.

2. to develop parenting curricula as a part of the basic course of studies which would be implemented throughout the school system.

3. continue to explore various ways to link the parent and teaching staff as a team to help children in school.

These goals are in various stages of implementation. Because of our commitment to reach a wider audience, we began three years ago to train a volunteer group of community leaders, social workers, paraprofessionals in the field of education and interested parents. They met in the evenings for a minimum of 36 hours of workshops in parent education led by the Affective Education Parenting staff. The following school year, the program allotted a small sum from its budget as a stipend for this group to lead parenting workshops in schools (thereby supplementing our small staff of three), in home and community settings. Today, the Parent Training Group has enabled us to reach a wider spread of parent audience. We believe we are now reaching parents who traditionally stay at home, perhaps out of apathy, disinterest or discomfort with school settings. A new group is currently taking the same training, thereby providing a replenishment for this pool of skilled, dedicated parent trainers.

In 1975 the program developed a mini-course called "Family Life Studies" which was designed to raise the awareness of high school and junior high students about the responsibilities involved in being a parent by looking at the family and how it operates. The course had limited implementation as there was little system-wide interest and support for such subject matter. The teachers who did use it were enthusiastic. Happily, the idea of preparing students for parenthood is gaining wide acceptance. At this writing the School District of Philadelphia's Curriculum Office is beginning to tease out concepts and approaches currently related to parenting skills which will be included as part of the Philadelphia school curricula K through 12 and which

will involve most of the disciplines. We feel proud of our pioneering in this direction. The third thrust, parent-teacher teams working together on a common goal is presently being implemented through a Title VII Right to Read Project awarded the Affective Education Program. Three (3) parent/teaching staff teams will work on a variety of activities for home and classroom designed to help their children be more "reading ready". We hope to produce evidence which will support the value of this teaming. This is, of course, only one approach; the possibilities for teaming are endless.

Working with parents is not easy. Parents have many demands upon their emotions, time and energy. Getting their involvement is often fraught with frustration and disappointment. Nevertheless we believe that if public education is to be a worthwhile, useful undertaking for ALL children, the school community has a duty to make a sincere, never ending effort to involve parents in its endeavors. The public school system has a duty to provide parents with all the expertise and resources it has to help them (parents) raise their children to cope successfully in the society in which they are born.

We further believe that such pervasive educational ills as underachievement, teenage pregnancy, dropout, vandalism, drug abuse and violence, would be alleviated if educators would give more creative thought, energy and resources to PARENT EDUCATION.

ENDNOTES

[1] Israel Charney, "The Courage of Real Family Experiencing", (unpublished manuscript, Herzliya Pituach, Israel, 1975).

[2] John P. Blessington, Let My Children Work! (New York 1975), p. 26.

[3] American Orhtopsychiatric Conference, held March 1975 in Washington, D.C.

[4] Sandra L. Pfeiffer, "The Maslow Need Hierarchy", The 1972 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators, 1972, pp. 125-26.

[5] Linda Beckman, "Causal Attributions of Teachers and Parents Regarding Children's Performance", Psychology in The Schools, xiii, no.2, (April 1976), p. 217.

[6] Clemmont Vontress, Counseling Negroes, (New York 1971), p. 13.

[7] Bruce Carroll Massey, Mona Vaughn Scott, Sanford M. Dornbush, "Rascism Without Rascists", The Black Scholar, I, no. 3, (November 1975), p. 12.

[8] Robert Staples, "To Be Young, Black and Oppressed", The Black Scholar, vii, no. 4, (December 1975), p.5.

[9] "School Violence - Vandalism", The Black Child Advocate, iv, (May 1975), p.5.

[10] Malcolm L. Meltzer and Bernard I. Levy, "Self-Esteem in a Public School", Psychology in the Schools, vii, no. 1, 1970, p.15.

[11] Staples, p. 6.

[12] Staples, p. 7.

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